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C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 000338

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SCE (NARDI), EUR/PA/PD (HORNBuckle)

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SUBJECT: WITH NO POLITICAL LEADERSHIP, CROATIA'S POSITION
ON IRAQ SOFTENING

REF: ZAGREB 326

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR LAWRENCE ROSSIN FOR REASON 1.5 (B,D)

1. (C) ALTHOUGH THE GOC MADE STRONG AND POSITIVE INITIAL
STATEMENTS AFTER SECRETARY POWELL'S PRESENTATION TO THE UNSC
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PAGE 02 ZAGREB 00338 121756Z
ON FEBRUARY 5, IT HAS DONE LITTLE SINCE THEN TO SHAPE THE
PUBLIC DEBATE AND NOTHING TO DESCRIBE THE THREAT POSED BY
SADDAM HUSSEIN'S WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION. THE AMBASSADOR
HAS GIVEN A SERIES OF ON-THE-RECORD INTERVIEWS AND THE
EMBASSY HAS PRACTICALLY FORCE-FED BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON
THE THREAT POSED BY IRAQ TO ALL LOCAL MEDIA. NEVERTHELESS,
THE DEBATE IN ZAGREB'S POLITICAL CIRCLES IS NOW FOCUSED
ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY ON WHETHER OR NOT FM PICULA SHOULD HAVE
SIGNED THE V-10 STATEMENT AND HOW CROATIA'S BID FOR EU
MEMBERSHIP WILL BE AFFECTED BY ITS POSITION ON IRAQ.

2. (C) PUBLIC OPINION, IN THE ABSENCE OF ANY DOMESTIC
POLITICAL LEADERSHIP ON THE ISSUE, IS RUNNING STRONG AGAINST
MILITARY ACTION IN IRAQ WITHOUT A NEW UNSC RESOLUTION. A
FEBRUARY 10 POLL CONDUCTED BY CROATIA'S MOST RELIABLE AGENCY
SHOWS THAT MORE THAN 80 PERCENT OF THE PUBLIC IS AGAINST
MILITARY ACTION. AT A FEBRUARY 12 PRESS CONFERENCE, PM RACAN
BACKED AWAY FROM THE V-10 STATEMENT, CALLING IT "IMPRECISE
AND OPEN TO INTERPRETATION," UNDERSCORING THAT IN SIGNING THE
STATEMENT, THE GOC UNDERTOOK NO NEW OBLIGATIONS TO SUPPORT
USG EFFORTS AGAINST IRAQ.

3. (C) RACAN SEEKS TO MAKE A CLEAR DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN
CROATIA'S COMMITMENT TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE WAR AGAINST
TERRORISM AND ANY POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO EFFORTS IN IRAQ.
ON FEBRUARY 11, RACAN REVIEWED THE MP PLATOON WHICH WILL
DEPLOY TO KABUL IN SUPPORT OF ISAF BY THE END OF FEBRUARY.
AT THE FEBRUARY 12 PRESS CONFERENCE, HE REITERATED CROATIA'S
SUPPORT FOR THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM. BUT HE SAID THAT HIS
GOVERNMENT HAS TAKEN NO DECISIONS ON HOW CROATIA MIGHT
CONTRIBUTE TO EFFORTS IN IRAQ. RACAN SAID THAT ANY DECISION
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PAGE 03 ZAGREB 00338 121756Z
TO CONTRIBUTE TO MILITARY EFFORTS AGAINST IRAQ WOULD HAVE TO
BE TAKEN BY THE CABINET, IN ACCORDANCE WITH CROATIA'S LAWS
AND CONSTITUTION, AND THEN ONLY AFTER WEIGHING ALL ARGUMENTS,
INCLUDING PUBLIC OPINION. "CROATIA ADVOCATES A PEACEFUL
RESOLUTION," SAID RACAN, AND ADDED THAT THE "POSITION OF THE
CROATIAN PUBLIC IS UNDERSTANDABLE," GIVEN CROATIA'S RECENT
EXPERIENCE IN WAR.

4. (C) RACAN -- NOT A DYNAMIC LEADER AT THE BEST OF TIMES --
IS TRYING TO KEEP HIS COALITION TOGETHER LONG ENOUGH TO
SUBMIT CROATIA'S APPLICATION TO THE EU BEFORE LIMPING TO
EARLY ELECTIONS (REFTEL). WE WILL CONTINUE TO URGE CROATIAN
GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS -- AND THE LOCAL PRESS -- TO STAY
FOCUSED ON THE IMPORTANT ISSUE AT HAND: DISARMING SADDAM
HUSSEIN. WITHOUT A CLEAR SIGNAL FROM THE EU OR NATO, RACAN'S
GOVERNMENT WILL LIKELY STAY ON THE FENCE.
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